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# NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE.

BY HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE.

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THERE is such general agreement touching the quality of Hawthorne's genius and the rank of his work in American literature, that the centennial of his birth invites comment on the conditions under which he developed his gifts, rather than a fresh estimate of the artistic value of his contribution to our prose. Our literature is singular in that, alone among the literatures of the greater races, it had beginnings but no youth; it was born highly sophisticated, if not full-grown. Its strength lies in vigor of conviction rather than in depth of experience; in definiteness of aim rather than in rich spontaneity; in moderation, poise and integrity rather than in passion, tidal flood of energy, surrender to imperious moods. It is, so far, the record of a clear-minded, idealistic, well-balanced people, bent on executive rectitude, rather than of a people deeply moved by the mystery and pathos of life, stirred by impulses which rise from the instincts and are stronger than reason, swept out of its moorings from time to time by mysterious currents from unexplored tracts of its nature. This does not mean that Americans are commonplace; it does mean that their art has not, save in rare moments, caught and held the force and splendor of elemental passion.

The Jews began the written record of their experience, both in idea and in action, with reports of cosmic forces subdued to vast ends, and of men stirring into life with immense vitality; the Greeks told the story of a great war set in motion by a passion for a beautiful woman; the Germans recited moving tales of gods and men, with swords bared in a thousand hours of reckless measuring of strength with strength; the English brought with them the legend of a hero slaying a monster; the French beguiled the slow-moving hours of the Middle Ages with the doings

of Alexandre, of Charlemagne, or Arthur; the Spaniards fed their youth with the brave adventures of the Cid; while the Irish were loving without counting the cost, and fighting for the sport of it, as far back as the time of Cuchulain. In epic, ballad, lyric and story, the first records of the older races have to do with reckless fighting, audacious adventure, lawless and uncalculating passion.

Our writing begins, on the other hand, with the reports of men who had put romance away with resolute hands, and were determined to achieve definite and rational ends in a New World; who were not without awe of its mystery, but who were chiefly concerned to get it under tillage, and to turn its resources to practical account. Our literature of fiction begins with "Ethan Brand," "Peter Rugg," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "Wieland: or the Transformation!" The significance of these facts has not yet been fully disclosed; when it is, we shall understand Poe and Hawthorne better.

The ancestors of Hawthorne left England while the memory of Shakespeare and his contemporaries was still fresh; the settlers of the next century might have read Fielding and Smollett in the first editions; but in Hawthorne, Emerson, Poe and Irving there is no hint of the sixteenth-century passion or of the unashamed virility of the eighteenth century. A sudden maturity seems to have descended on the men of the New World. Puritanism had sublimated life by denying some of its instincts and putting others outside the pale of written speech; and harassing dangers and inexorable work gave elemental impulses safe channels of expression. The men of New England were engrossed by the necessity of saving their souls, and the men of Virginia and South Carolina by the pleasure of a free, hospitable, active, out-of-door life. There were intellectual interests, scholarly traditions and well-read libraries North and South; but life was essentially practical, and art kept company with none of the early emigrants from the Old to the New World.

The New World was so new that all the rudimentary work of civilization had to be done over again; it was without accumulations of legend, romance, learning, religion or society; everything had to be made out of hand. This work was done by several hundred thousand families, forming a long and often defenceless skirmish line in a country full of unorganized but relentless

enemies. These families came from different countries, or from different classes of society. They had little acquaintance with one another, and in that period absence of knowledge meant presence of suspicion and distrust. The means of communication were few, the distances great, and travel was slow, laborious and expensive. When Hawthorne, Emerson, and Poe were born, these scattered communities had taken on a formal unity as the result of a struggle for the right to manage their own affairs, and they had acted together for three or four decades rather by force of circumstances than by reason of any deep sense of community of feeling or of aims. The former colonists were living under one government, but they had not become a nation.

The prophetic sense in Emerson divined the national idea long before it had taken deep root or found clear expression in the minds of his contemporaries; but Hawthorne and Poe, being primarily, and by the compulsion of a positive if somewhat sublimated genius, artists, and concerned largely with the forms of things, had no such divination; and while both had behind them the distinctive and highly organized life of sections, neither had the ample background, nor was either fed by the deep and rich influences, of a highly developed national life. Hawthorne was a New-Englander rather than an American; there were few Americans in his time. "At present," he writes, "we have no country, at least none in the sense an Englishman has a country. I never conceived, in reality, what a true and warm love of country is till I witnessed it in the breasts of Englishmen. The States are too various and extended to form really one country. New England is quite as large a lump of earth as my heart can really take in." In Poe there is no hint of the wealth of association, memory and experience, capitalized by a race which has lived together for centuries, which one feels in Chaucer or Tennyson; in Hawthorne there is no suggestion of the vast, deep, rich movement of an old society which one feels in Balzac, in Thackeray and Tourgenieff. The absence of national consciousness and of those forces which flow with tidal volume through great communities and make them as one in the crisis of experience, and the absorption of men in practical affairs, are factors of the first importance in any endeavor to understand or estimate the work of Hawthorne, Emerson and Poe, the most important figures in American literature.

Neither Hawthorne nor Poe touched the life of his time; nor, for that matter, did they touch with the bare hand the life of any time. Poe made his own world, fashioning it out of phantasy as boldly as he shaped the men and women of his imagination. We seem always to be looking at Hawthorne's figures from a distance; we never touch hands with them; they never speak directly to us; we do not expect to come upon them in any of those chance meetings which sometimes bring us face to face with Becky Sharp, Maggie Tolliver and Silas Lapham. Even in "The Blithedale Romance," or "The Marble Faun," where we are within speaking and hearing distance, the drama unfolds before us in a silence as deep as that which enfolds "The Scarlet Letter." Emerson spoke to the soul of his countrymen with the sustained nobility of deep insight and the persuasive eloquence of a very noble and sane outlook on life in its integrity and wholeness; but in Emerson it is altitude rather than mass which gives his work its spiritual distinction. He was not unaware of a certain thinness of tone in it, a certain lack of mass; for he notes in himself what he calls "lack of constitution."

There was no lack of sensitive genius in Emerson, Hawthorne or Poe, but there were distinct deficiencies in their background and in their period; to none of them did a rich national life give its fulness of power, its broad, deep humanness; to none of them did a warm, unfolding air of sympathy bring its liberating force, its benignant and fertilizing influence. Emerson wrote much about his age, but chiefly about its possibilities; he escaped habitually into the upper air from the pressure of its hard conditions. Poe gives no hint anywhere, save in a few critical discussions, that he had any concern with the movements of his time or any interest in them. Hawthorne was a close and shrewd observer; but when his imagination begins to play, he is off and away as instinctively as the poet of most vagrant genius.

For all these writers, and especially for Hawthorne and Poe, art was a refuge from a country which did not feed the imagination, and a life which did not lend itself readily to imaginative interpretation. If there had been literary scholars in America at the beginning of the nineteenth century, they would probably have predicted a literature of heroic figures, of the idealization of action, of realistic devotion to fact and force; instead of this reproduction in art of provincial and local activities and energies,

there came a literature notable chiefly for its detachment from actualities, its sublimation of passion, its purity and distinction. Not until our own time has the American writer begun to deal at first hand and with his whole heart with contemporary conditions in this country. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and other stories which seem at first glance to refute this statement, really confirm it; not one of these was written with the eye on the facts of life, or for the love of those facts.

Isolated by the fact that his genius was of greater capacity than the volume of life about him, and that it was of a delicacy and subtlety which that life could not furnish with congenial material, Hawthorne was isolated also by the force of ancestral facts, and by his temperament. He has left an impression of his ancestors which is at once curiously impersonal and intensely personal; from the first emigrant who bore his name, "grave, bearded, sable-cloaked and steeple-crowned," treading the streets with a stately port, with his Bible and his sword; his son, so conspicuous in the persecution of the witches that "their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him"; to the hardy ship-masters of a later century, who began before the mast and retired to the leisure of comfortable age from the quarter-deck. There were survivals of all these ancestors in Hawthorne; landsman as he was, he was rarely out of hearing of the sea; the only practical occupations to which he put his hand kept him on or near the wharfs, and the notes of his consular experience betray his constant interest in sailors and his instinctive feeling of relationship with them. It was, however, by the earlier and sterner men of his name that his imagination was most deeply attracted. Removed from them by generations of seafaring experience, liberated from their intense and provincial ideas of life and duty, he lived in and through the experiences of his Puritan ancestors with the marvellous penetration of a genius of rare psychologic affinities and insight. "I know not whether those ancestors of mine," he writes, "bethought themselves to repent, and ask pardon of heaven for their cruelties; or whether they are now groaning under the heavy consequences of them, in another state of being. At all events, I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them—as I have heard, and as the dreary and unprosperous condition of the race, for many a long year

back, would argue to exist — may be now and henceforth removed.”

Isolation was a potent fact in those impressionable years when he was finding himself and coming slowly into possession of his imagination and of the materials with which he was to work. The twelve years in the little room under the eaves in his mother's house in Salem, from 1825 to 1837, included the entire period of his earliest maturity, from his twenty-first to his thirty-third year. While most youths of genius were getting acquainted with life through experience, he was looking at it from a distance and with meditative eyes. Of action as a form of self-expression he knew nothing at a time when action solicits and compels the great majority of men.

He was not only shut off from his fellows, spending long days in reading, or dreaming, or composing and taking his walks at night, but he was separated from his own family. The emphasis on personality, which was the note of the Puritan view of life and the source of its strength and weakness, has produced a peculiar type of morbid character in New England, the distinguishing mark of which is its passion for solitude. In the South, where the social instinct has been highly developed, the “crank” is found at the post-office and the country store; in New England he lives by himself on the outskirts of the village, or in some lonely farmhouse; and the New England communities are few in which no hermit is found.

During the long years of her widowhood, Hawthorne's mother not only lived apart from the world, but from the members of her own family. His sisters followed their mother's example and lived in their own rooms. In such a ghostly atmosphere the young man succumbed to the prevailing habit, and his meals were often left at his locked door and eaten without human fellowship in the solitude of his room. “We do not even *live* at our house,” he once said. In the morning he studied, in the afternoon he wrote and in the evening he read; neither visitors nor friends knocked at his door. Delight in the sense of being at home and the opportunities of reading and dreaming gave the early years of this monastic life keen interest, and contributed not a little to the fostering of his rare genius and his delicate and sensitive talent; but, as time passed, the monotony of his life, its unnatural isolation, involving the denial of the instincts of his youth, bore heavily

on his spirits, and bred a depression that chilled his imagination and checked the creative impulse in him. Driven back upon himself by the lack of a warm, compelling life about him, such as bore Shakespeare on a flood-tide to the largest prosperity of growth and art; finding nothing in the plain, sincere, but unimaginative community in which he lived to absorb or vitalize his imagination; denied his share in the sympathy and genial warmth of normal family life, Hawthorne took refuge in a world which was full of moral reality, but which was as remote from the actual world as if he had created it out of hand.

Neither in faith nor in practice was he a Puritan. He saw life as the Puritan had once seen it, with clear and authoritative insight; but he saw it under radically different conditions and with the immense modification of the artistic temperament. Through all manners, customs, dress, institutions, he saw, as the Puritan had seen, the interior reality—the life of the soul. It was as if the externalities of life had no separate existence for him; he was aware only of the immortal element in the show and movement of things. And this immortal element was present in his view, not as a free, expanding energy under normal conditions; but crippled, baffled, beaten about by circumstances; distorted and misshapen not only by failure and weakness, but by a deep-going corruption; continually driven back upon itself until it groped blindly in the mysteries of morbid experience. Hawthorne's Puritan inheritance showed itself in his absorption in the problems not only of the spirit, but of the spirit out of harmony with itself and at odds with its own nature.

American fiction began with the application of the most subtle psychology to the study and analysis of character, and Hawthorne, Browne and Poe are the progenitors of Mr. Henry James and of Mrs. Wharton; with this radical difference, that the earlier writers of fiction did not apply their methods to living tissues; they dealt almost entirely with the past or with phantoms of their own creation. Hawthorne's Puritan inheritance determined the bent of his mind, and gave him the key to a world already fast vanishing below the horizon of thought; but his genius, which was fundamentally artistic and therefore non-Puritan, compelled him to look at the world of the Puritan spiritual tragedy from a distance; and when he fastened on the same aspects of experience in contemporary life, as in "The Blithedale Romance" and "The



Marble Faun," he held his figures at arm's length, and never for a moment do we lose consciousness of the fact that we are "moving about in worlds not realized." His inheritance and his genius were at odds in Hawthorne; the temperament was sympathetic with the inheritance, and his way of living prepared for and invited the ghostly figures which preoccupied his meditations. But his temperament was also artistic and craved color, vitality, form, beauty; hence the extraordinary firmness and fineness of tissue in his work, its precision of statement and its suggestiveness to the imagination, its beauty born in a feeling not only for the subtle and delicate resources of diction, but for the mystery of relationship between spirit and symbol. Hence, also, the sense of remoteness which is never absent from his work; the feeling that we are looking at his men and women through a veil. In the most poignant moments in "The Scarlet Letter," we are never pierced to the heart as, for instance, in "Anna Karénina," in "Crime and Punishment," in "Poor Folk."

Hawthorne impresses us deeply, but he does not agitate us. When he lays the human soul bare, as he lays bare the soul of Dimmesdale, the process is so deliberate and searching that, when we reach the supreme moment of torture, we seem to have come to it through an intellectual rather than an emotional experience. Even when Hawthorne moves rapidly and with a modicum of analysis to the end of the tale, we seem to be reading, not the annals of our time, but the story of

". . . old, unhappy, far-off things,  
And battles long ago."

Hawthorne was not only the forerunner of the psychologists in fiction, but he was also the prophet of the symbolists. He does not sacrifice the ethical motive, the searching disclosure of character, to the beauty and suggestiveness of the symbol; but the tales and novels present marvellous symbolic effects, and are unfolded with a rich circumstance of symbolism that takes possession of the imagination, and excludes all other objects save those which contribute to the subtle and complete unfolding of the drama. The note-books bear witness on every page to the closeness and exactness of his observation; he saw objects, both natural and human, with perfect clarity of vision. If he lacks Thoreau's inimitable knowledge of the detail of natural life, he has the same sharpness

of sight. Nothing escapes him, and nothing is outlined with a careless hand. But the moment a figure appears in the landscape, the landscape begins to relate itself to the figure, to take on its character, to wear the color of its mood, to suggest its innermost experience. As in Poe's tales, familiar things under the clearest sky, in the broadest light, become charged with mystery and meaning, and take possession of the reader's senses while the actors take possession of his imagination. Like Poe, Hawthorne begins by slowly and certainly excluding everything that distracts attention, and gradually closes all avenues of escape until both actors and spectators are isolated in a world remade by the temperament, the passion, the sin which are bearing fruit in the disintegration or reformation of a human soul. The daughter of Rappaccini becomes as deadly as the flowers in her father's garden, and there is not a flower among them which is not exhaling its poison from the minute the spectator sets foot within the fateful place.

The isolation of Hawthorne's life seems, in the light of his work, of a piece with his segregation of the world of his phantasy from the world of reality. The most devoted and chivalrous of lovers to the very end of his life, the most companionable and fascinating of fathers, a loyal friend to the few who possessed his heart and broke through his reserve by sheer force of affection, he was, perhaps, the most detached man of a generation in which men were dominated by the passion for causes, and by zeal for the betterment of their fellows. He had political convictions, and was not only a party man, but an office-holder; but no turn of his party's fortunes ever really touched him, and the absorbing movements of his time awoke no response in his heart. He loved a little group with beautiful tenderness; the rest of mankind he studied. There was a vein of something rich in his imagination, but in his moments of freest expression his style never passed certain limits of reserve, never quite realized the splendor which seemed at times on the very point of spreading the hue of moving passion over his closely packed and subtly phrased sentences. The reticence of his nature was so instinctive, and became so much a part of him, that it held his writing back from that last stage of abandon, of unconscious revelation, which other masters of style reach in their happiest moments. One cannot escape the feeling that the acute New England self-consciousness laid its spell on Hawthorne, as on all the other writers of his section, and that he

was never quite free from the haunting fear that he should reveal more than he intended; which is precisely what the greatest writers do, in those brief but glorious hours when they are transported out of themselves and lifted above themselves.

There is not only a touch of pallor on Hawthorne's work, but there is, at times, a suggestion of rusticity in his style; as if he had not quite gained the freedom of his craft. It is here that the provincialism of his early surroundings left its trace; in spite of the rare beauty and distinction of his diction, there appear in it from time to time traces of a world of high interests but of narrow artistic associations. The construction of the sentences is, as a rule, not only sound, but full of that kind of felicity which lies within the reach of the man of artistic genius only; but there are also traces of rigidity, the marks of his solitude and detachment and of his isolation from the vital currents of artistic feeling and habit. His style has at times the richness of texture of tapestry or of a rare brocade, but its lines are not always flowing, its folds not always free and perfectly expressive of that which they clothe. Great beauty he certainly has, but radiance was denied him.

One feels in him a curious absence of that element of youth which is the characteristic of all other American writers of his rank except Poe. The gift of youth seems to have been denied both these men of sensitive genius; in a world so new that all fortune seemed within the reach of audacity and energy, there was a touch of Old World tragedy on these children of a young civilization. From neither was the essential pathos of life hidden; neither was diverted or imposed upon by the brave new trappings, the novel and stimulating surroundings, of the old races on the new continent. Both seemed to look through the glamour of immense material possessions to the ancient soul of man, always facing the same fate, always under the shadow of the same failures, calamities, sins; and both sought in art to escape from the hardness and materialism of an immature civilization.

To Hawthorne, however, was given one resource which was denied to Poe: the resource of humor. His humor was not contagious like Irving's; it had none of the racy tang of the soil, like Lowell's; it was not quick-footed like Holmes's, in whose work it is continually losing its pervasiveness and gaining the concentration of wit. In Hawthorne, humor takes the form of a gentle brooding over the foibles and weaknesses of men; often sombre,

rarely saturnine; gaining a certain effectiveness from its lack of gayety. There is no overflow of buoyant spirits, no flooding of the inlets and recesses of thought and experience with the full, deep movement of a rich, powerful nature, charged with vitality and abounding in health; there is, rather, a quiet meditative contrast between the externalities and the realities of man's fortunes in this world; the play of a keenly observant, detached and reflective mind over the surface of life. Hawthorne's humor is full of thought; it never carries him out of himself; it never loses the sense of proportion and relation; it is keen, penetrating, searching, full of intelligence. It is so dispassionate and impersonal that it seems at times slightly touched with malice.

The chapter on "The Custom-House," which serves as a preface to "The Scarlet Letter," is an example of the cool, deliberate play of his humor; of its keen and, at times, caustic quality. It is probable that he was not wholly aware of the keenness of his pen, and that the local storm which broke about him when that report of a provincial town appeared, was like a bolt out of a clear sky. If his humor shows at times a sharp edge it does not provoke laughter, any more than his pathos brings tears.

His genius was extraordinarily sensitive, but it was not lacking in virility and energy. Isolation brought out the lines of his individuality, and not only compelled him to use the material which was most vitally related to his imagination, and therefore most completely possessed by it, but to create his own methods and form his own style. He shows almost no trace of the influence of other writers; in art, as in life, he stood aloof from his time. The vitality of his genius is shown by the fulness of its expression under such adverse conditions; his distinction is heightened by the fact that it was not gained by free intercourse with the masters of his craft. His art is the more wonderful because he was so entirely self-instructed. He is our foremost man of letters by virtue of a distinction which, though self-achieved, is of the finest and highest. He is the most perfect artist in our literature, not only by reason of the temperament, insight, sense of form and resource of expression which he put into his work, but because his rare and beautiful achievements were made in air so chilling to such aims as his, and in an age in which he was an alien by the very quality of his genius.

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